

Greater Than War

Asa Steele



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THE PENN PUBLISHING COMPANY
PHILADELPHIA

Greater Than War

A War-Time Play in One Act

By

ASA STEELE

Author of "A Cure for Hypnotism"



PHILADELPHIA
THE PENN PUBLISHING COMPANY

1918

PS 635
Z9S8125

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NOV 22 1918

Greater Than War

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no 1

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CHARACTERS

THE WOMAN	-	-	-	-	-	<i>a French gentlewoman</i>
THE SOLDIER	-	-	-	-	-	<i>one of the enemy</i>
THE SERVANT	-	-	-	-	-	<i>a very old man</i>
THE ORDERLY	-	-	-	-	-	<i>a young man</i>

TIME OF PLAYING.—Thirty minutes.

STORY OF THE PLAY

A French gentlewoman and her baby, together with her aged servant, live in a house under fire of the enemy's guns. A squadron of soldiers enters the house. Their officer, embittered against the French people because of an incident which happened to his mother years ago, orders the Woman to go with them. When she refuses, he remembers the child. "You must go! It shall be the price of your life, and his!" The gold chain about the Woman's throat breaks. She uses the crucifix as her final plea. "Where did you get that?" The revelation. The Woman's mother has done the Soldier's mother a great service. "You and your son are free."

COSTUMES, ETC.

THE WOMAN. About twenty-five. A plain dress of any dark material. She wears a shawl over her shoulders.

THE SOLDIER. About fifty. Wears a gray uniform and overcoat, splashed with mud.

THE SERVANT. A man about seventy. He wears a dark suit, rather worn. His hair is white, and he is stooped and decrepit.

THE ORDERLY. A boy of twenty. He wears a mud-stained gray uniform.

PROPERTIES

Shawl. Gloves for the Soldier. Small tray with bread, cold meat and fruit and a glass. Bottle of wine (cold tea may be used). Sword belt. Cigarette. Crucifix on chain, to be worn by Woman.

SCENE PLOT

SCENE.—Parlor of a French country house. Window up c., opens on garden. (If desired the window may be omitted.) Doors R. and L. A table R. c. with a chair at its right. A large armchair is down R. and another down L. A hat rack is up L. c.

Greater Than War

SCENE.—*Parlor of a French country house. A window, c. back, opens on a lawn and garden. A door at L. leads to an entrance hall. There is another door at R. A table R. C., with a chair on the right of it. Another armchair at L. C.*

(*At rise of curtain, the WOMAN sits in the armchair down L. On her knees a baby is sleeping, as she rocks it gently to and fro. Over the WOMAN'S shoulders is a knitted scarf-like shawl. From a distance comes the booming of heavy guns, incessant, sometimes in volleys, sometimes singly. The WOMAN turns, listening to the gun-fire. She shivers and hugs the baby to her breast, kissing it. The gun-fire ceases. The WOMAN rises and goes up c. to the window, listening in the silence. As she rises, the shawl falls from her shoulders to the seat of her chair. The SERVANT enters quickly, L.*)

WOMAN (*advancing toward him*). Well?

SERVANT (L.). The fighting's done.

WOMAN. We held the line against them?

SERVANT (*in keen distress*). Lady, you are brave?

WOMAN (*bravely*). I am a woman of France! Tell me. We've held the line against them? (*The SERVANT is silent.*) Why don't you answer? (*The SERVANT'S head sinks slowly to his breast, his hands fall to his sides limply.*) They've driven us back? They're coming? Here!

(*She looks around her as if for a means of escape.*)

SERVANT (*going up c. to her, pleading*). Go!

Quickly! There's time! These men—these beasts show no mercy to women or babies. Oh, lady! Lady! Could you have heard what I have, seen what these eyes grew old while beholding —

WOMAN. You can tell me nothing. I—know!

(She looks off c.)

SERVANT. Come! Through the kitchen and garden to my home. That's too small for them to notice. Here, to a large house on a hilltop, they'll come first.

WOMAN. I'll stay here.

SERVANT. You seek death?

WOMAN. I'm not afraid.

SERVANT. You, a soldier's wife, may not be. What of the child?

WOMAN. Jacques!

(A cry of pain as she hugs the baby to her breast. A volley of musketry is heard off L., close at hand. The WOMAN comes down c., in terror.)

SERVANT. They're coming! *(He goes c. to the WOMAN, pleading.)* I'm old. My life is worth little. I'll give it happily for you. That would not repay the debt I owe your father—rearing me, giving me work, a home, helping me when days were dark. I'd give much more than life to pay that debt. But what is my old life against these beasts?

WOMAN *(resolutely)*. I don't ask it of you. Go to your home and safety.

SERVANT. And you?

WOMAN. I'll—stay—here! *(The SERVANT turns from her in despair, wringing his hands.)* This is my home. Last night—I did not tell you—last night my husband was here.

SERVANT. M'sieur Henri?

WOMAN *(c.)*. His regiment lay close by, waiting for to-day. He came to me —

(Another volley of musketry sounds off L., close at hand.)

SERVANT (*going toward the window, c.*). M'sieur Henri? In the fight to-day!

WOMAN (*c.*). He told me all you know of these beasts. He tried to make me go. I would not. Why stay? If he is wounded, he'll have them bring him here. If he lives, he'll come again, here, to his home, to seek me. He'll need me the more now, in his sorrow. Only here can he find me. Only thus will he know I'm safe. Then we can go together.

SERVANT (*up c., slowly*). If he is—not—safe?

WOMAN. My husband gone; I at the mercy of these beasts—it's not a world I'll live in if they do!

(*A loud knocking at a door is heard off L. The WOMAN and the SERVANT turn quickly, listening.*)

SERVANT. They're here!

WOMAN. My husband! Let him in.

(*The knocking is repeated, louder now.*)

SERVANT. He would not knock. They're strangers—enemies!

WOMAN. Let my husband in!

(*The SERVANT exits, L., leaving the door open.*)

SOLDIER (*off L., knocking*). Open the door!
(*Knocking.*) Open!

(*The WOMAN gives a shiver of terror, then quickly goes to the door R., stands for a moment listening, then exits R., with the child, closing the door after her. The SERVANT reënters L., standing above the door.*)

SERVANT. Here, m'sieurs.

(*The SOLDIER enters L. The ORDERLY follows him on.*)

SOLDIER (*looking about*). We'll eat here. (*To the SERVANT.*) Who live in this house?

SERVANT. Myself, m'sieur—and—myself—and——

SOLDIER (*L.*). —And yourself! Ha! Ha! Ha!

Be certain of it. Lie to me and I'll shoot you where you stand.

SERVANT. Myself alone, m'sieur.

SOLDIER. Bring me food, then. And wine! Your best wine.

SERVANT. Yes, m'sieur.

(Exit SERVANT, L. The SOLDIER goes to the ORDERLY, speaking in command.)

SOLDIER. Take the squad to the kitchen. Let them eat what they find. In twenty minutes, report to me here. (The ORDERLY salutes and exits, L. The SOLDIER crosses R. to the table, whistling gaily. He lays his gloves on the table, R. Standing thus, he sees the WOMAN'S shawl on the seat of the armchair down R. He goes to armchair, takes up the shawl, examining it, then begins to laugh.) Ha! Ha! Ha! (He throws the shawl back on the chair as the SERVANT enters, L. He carries a small tray holding bread, cold meat and fruit and a glass. In the other hand he carries a bottle of wine. These he places on the table, R. C. The SOLDIER starts to remove his belt.) Here—help me. (The SERVANT helps the SOLDIER off with his sword belt. The SOLDIER seizes the SERVANT by the arm, whirling him around. The SERVANT staggers in his weakness.) Make haste! You're as slow as a snail after a feast of flies! (The SERVANT hurriedly helps the SOLDIER to remove his overcoat and helmet, which he places on rack up L. C., together with the belt. The SOLDIER sits at the table, R. C., and begins to eat. The SERVANT comes R. C. to table, opens the bottle of wine and fills the glass with some of it, then stands L. of table. SOLDIER, as he eats.) You say you're alone here.

SERVANT. Yes, m'sieur.

SOLDIER. A caretaker, eh?

SERVANT. Yes, m'sieur.

SOLDIER. Who was in the family when they were here?

SERVANT. M'sieur, the Captain——

SOLDIER. Who's fighting us, eh? Who else?

SERVANT. Madame, the Captain's wife, and her little child.

SOLDIER (*cunningly*). Both of whom have fled, I suppose?

SERVANT. Yes, m'sieur.

SOLDIER. And if Madame, the Captain's wife, were here? Ha! Ha! Ha! That's one thing I cannot resist—a pretty woman!

SERVANT. You're hungry, m'sieur. Don't talk—eat!

SOLDIER. Woman! Lovely woman! (*He raises his glass of wine, then drinks.*) How old is your mistress, Madame, the Captain's wife?

SERVANT. When women pass a certain age, m'sieur, they have no certain age.

SOLDIER. Ha! Ha! Ha! She is pretty, I suppose—cheek like a rose, lips framed for kisses——

SERVANT (*hastily*). Um—don't talk—eat!

SOLDIER. Ha! Ha! Ha! A glance, a kiss, a soft embrace——

SERVANT. Um—don't talk—drink!

SOLDIER. Drink with me! (*He throws the wine remaining in the glass into the SERVANT's face.*) Ha! Ha! Ha! (*He refills his glass from the bottle.*)

SERVANT (*wiping the wine from his face*). I see nothing to laugh at.

SOLDIER. Laugh! (*Threatening, half rising.*) Laugh, I say!

SERVANT (*mournfully*). Ha—ha—ha——

SOLDIER. That's better. (*He drinks the rest of his wine and rises, crosses to down R., and lights a cigarette.*) Now tell your mistress to come here.

SERVANT (*L. of table, astonished*). M'sieur! I told you——

SOLDIER. You said she had left here. I say she's here. If not, what do you make of this? (*He takes the WOMAN's shawl from the chair, extending it toward the SERVANT.*) Don't tell me that you wear this. Ha! Ha! Ha! Where is Madame, the Captain's wife?

SERVANT (*slowly*). I do not know.

SOLDIER. Here?

(*He points toward the door, R. The SERVANT hastily goes around back of table and gets between the SOLDIER and the door R.*)

SERVANT. M'sieur, you must not!

SOLDIER (*fiercely*). When I say must, no servant may say must not. Bring her here!

SERVANT. There's a life between you and her. You must take that first.

SOLDIER (*down R.*). Whose life?

SERVANT (*at door R.*). M'sieur, I'm old. My wife is dead. My only son has shed his blood for France. (*He pauses with emotion, then turns to the SOLDIER proudly.*) Yet had I all again—youth, wife and son—all would not buy forgiveness for letting you know this woman is here. So take my life!

SOLDIER (*going toward him in a rage*). Ten thousand devils —— (*The door R. opens and the WOMAN appears in it. The SOLDIER sees her, stops, then crosses to down L., laughing.*) Ha! Ha! Ha!

(*The SERVANT follows the SOLDIER's gaze and turning, sees the WOMAN.*)

SERVANT. Madame!

(*He covers his face with his hands.*)

WOMAN. I could not help but hear. (*She goes to the SERVANT and puts her hand gently on his shoulder.*) Go! Find my husband. Tell him I died as his wife should.

SERVANT. I did not know! Now ——

WOMAN. I forgive you. Go!

(*With deep emotion, the SERVANT looks up into her face, seizes her hand, kisses it reverently, then exits R. The WOMAN walks to the L. side of the table and turns to the SOLDIER. For a moment they regard each other in silence.*)

SOLDIER. Our regiment attacked your outposts this morning ——

WOMAN. I know—who and what you are!

SOLDIER. Women have men at a disadvantage. We're not supposed to answer back. Ha! Ha! Ha! I'm a soldier—yes. Your enemy. But before all else, I'm your conqueror!

WOMAN. You've invaded my home, conquered me—a woman. Well?

SOLDIER (*looking at his wrist watch*). In ten minutes we must be off. I've no time for words. We stopped here to take what we wanted—food, and other things.

WOMAN. You have the food. So go!

SOLDIER. You forget. The other things. When we go, you must go with us!

WOMAN. I?

SOLDIER. Officially, our prisoner of war. (*Comes R. to her.*) Actually, as my prisoner! Mine! (*He seizes her hands. She wrenches herself loose and moves quickly to R. side of the table, R. C.*) You had best accept—quietly. What can you gain otherwise? Your servant can do little. I need only go to this door (*indicating door L.*) and call my squad. They would outnumber you ten to one.

WOMAN (*scornfully*). Your ten men—against me! Have you no pity, no sense of shame?

SOLDIER. None. I'm what you made me.

WOMAN. I made you?

SOLDIER. You French.

WOMAN. We don't treat women so!

SOLDIER. I'll prove you do! When we last invaded France, my father was a merchant in Paris. He was ordered home to join his regiment. My mother, with me, a child in arms, were left to follow. My mother was seized, imprisoned by you French. When they set us free, the frontiers were closed. Her money had been taken from her; she had no means of getting more. My mother, a lady like you, carried her baby through the streets of Paris, begging for food.

WOMAN. The French did not do that. War was to blame—war forced on us by those you serve!

SOLDIER (*casting aside her words with a negative*

gesture). When my mother finally did reach home her health was gone. What she had passed through—killed her. As I grew old enough to understand, I lived for but one thing—that I might learn to repay that wrong done to her—and to me! We are now ordered to conquer with both bullets and fear. That is true enough. But I am taking revenge on you French because I hate!

WOMAN. That will not excuse the worst of wrongs to me—I am a stranger to you!

SOLDIER. We are ordered to kill, burn, stop at no act of violence. Terror conquers as well as gun-powder. What do I care whether you are friend or stranger? Your pleas are useless! Come! You must go with us!

(She confronts him fearlessly.)

WOMAN. I demand my freedom! By your manhood—

SOLDIER *(laughing)*. I can show no mercy!

WOMAN. By all that is just!

SOLDIER. War is above the law.

WOMAN. Have you no woman at home—no wife or daughters whom you can see, desperate, as I am now?

SOLDIER *(showing a momentary tenderness as she speaks, then quickly becoming severe again)*. They are of us; you of the French, whom I hate. Come! We're wasting time!

(He goes to the rack up L. C., and puts on his overcoat.)

WOMAN. I ask safety—in the name of your mother.

SOLDIER *(stopping abruptly)*. My mother! *(He speaks tenderly, gripped by emotion, then controls himself and speaks harshly.)* I'm a soldier. *(He puts on his helmet.)* "Must" is my only parent.

(He fastens on his belt.)

WOMAN. Treat me as you would have had us treat

your mother in those past years in Paris. Think of me—as a mother.

SOLDIER (*surprised, he reflects for a moment, then laughs grimly*). Ha! Ha! Ha! I forget! Your child. It is here! (*He comes down to L. of table.*)

WOMAN. No! No!

SOLDIER. Your servant told me.

WOMAN. Ah! (*A cry of pain.*)

SOLDIER (*L. of table*). Your child! That makes it easier!

WOMAN (*R. of table*). You would not harm him?

SOLDIER. He shall be an added weapon to make you obey. You must go! It shall be the price of your life and his!

WOMAN (*in despair*). Kill him! A soul as pure as saint or angel! (*Sobbing.*) My little son——

SOLDIER (*roughly*). He shall be as I was in the streets of Paris! Where is he? I'll take him——

(*The WOMAN makes a quick movement to intercept him as he tries to cross R.*)

WOMAN (*up C., pleading*). There must be some way—there must! Hear his voice, look into his dear eyes and your heart will melt; you'll let him live!

SOLDIER (*in front of table R. C.*). No!

WOMAN. Can no prayers move you?

SOLDIER. You choose weapons too familiar—tears, entreaties! Beside my will, they are swords of glass. (*Chuckling.*) Come with us, or your child shall be sacrificed. Choose!

(*The WOMAN leaves him and crosses to C. quickly, distraught and desperate. She stops suddenly, in reflection. Then she pulls at the thin gold chain which encircles her neck. It breaks. She looks at the crucifix which is suspended from the chain. Then she turns to the SOLDIER and slowly extends the crucifix toward him.*)

WOMAN. Then I ask safety for myself and child—by this!

(*The SOLDIER laughs as he turns to look at the*

crucifix. At sight of it, the merriment dies in his face. His expression, as he regards the symbol, turns to one of amazement.)

SOLDIER (*coming c. to WOMAN*). Where did you get that?

WOMAN. I've worn it always.

SOLDIER. Before that? Before it was yours?

WOMAN. My mother gave it to me.

SOLDIER. Where did she get it?

WOMAN. She had it from a beggar. Often she told me of it. My mother pitied her, saved her from arrest.

SOLDIER. And then —

WOMAN. The beggar gave my mother this, promised to do her utmost to repay my mother's kindness.

SOLDIER. On the other side of the crucifix—what is written there?

WOMAN (*surprised*). How did you know? (*She turns over the crucifix to read.*) It says —

SOLDIER. The words are these: "Love, help, forgive" !

WOMAN (*amazed, as she reads from the crucifix*). "Love, help, forgive."

SOLDIER. That is mine.

(He extends his hand for the crucifix.)

WOMAN. Yours?

SOLDIER. My mother was the beggar.

WOMAN (*slowly realizing*). Your mother gave this pledge to mine?

SOLDIER (*taking the crucifix*). She told me of it a thousand times. It was in the streets of Paris when life seemed most hopeless for her—and for me. She promised the woman to whom she gave it to hold it sacred, to return good for good, when the owner offered that.

WOMAN. Then I ask you to redeem her pledge. I ask your mercy for myself and my child. (*The SOLDIER turns from her.*) What are conquest, power—the whole world, compared with love like this? My

love for my son, as your mother loved you; my mother's pity for yours —

(The ORDERLY enters L.)

ORDERLY *(saluting)*. You ordered me to report in twenty minutes, sir.

SOLDIER *(saluting)*. Let the squad fall in. Then await me. *(The ORDERLY salutes and exits, L. The SOLDIER looks at the WOMAN for a moment in silence, then regards the crucifix. He turns it over again and reads the inscription on it.)* "Love, help, forgive" —

(He stands for a moment, hesitating, then goes to the WOMAN, lifts her hand and places the crucifix in it.)

WOMAN *(softly)*. My son? Myself?

SOLDIER. What this means to me is greater than war, Madame. You and your son are free.

(The SOLDIER salutes and exits L.)

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